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Mughal Court Poetry About Kashmir: Topography, Texts And Pretexts

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Abstract

Mughals formally conquered Kashmir in 1586 during the reign of emperor Akbar. A large corpus of poetry and writings were written about Kashmir during this period. The present paper is an attempt to understand the Mughal imperial imagination about Kashmir through some of the writings available. Theoretically, the paper is guided by Edward Saidian method of reading. Samples from Mughal historiography and poetry would be taken for analysis and interpretation.

Keywords: Mughal Court Poetry, Texts, Pretexts, Topography and Images

The Mughal conquest of Kashmir in 1586 during the reign of Emperor Akbar was, on the one hand, the end of Kashmir as a sovereign nation, and, on the other hand, it was, of course, Kashmir's annexation with a cosmopolitan center where Delhi, Central Asia, Persia and other parts of the world shared a rich cultural ethos, worldview and knowledge production. Yousuf Shah Chak was a proud Kashmiri who offered the best of his resistances against all Mughal invasions, small or big in magnitude; however, due to many internal weaknesses and the shrewdness of Mughal army commanders, he finally lost and was subsequently arrested by Mughals and made to die at Biswak. This paper is not about the political relationship of the Mughal empire and Kashmir. It is a small attempt to interpret and understand the Mughal court poetry from Akbar's times to that of Shahjahan and Jahangir. Theoretically speaking, it is an attempt to place the Mughal court poetry in its context, thereby unraveling some of its discursive features. Such an attempt will obviously necessitate developing intertextual connections with some of the most important historical and literary sources of the time; therefore, references to chronicles, travelogues and other documents of the time will be helpful in understanding some of the discursivities of the Mughal court poetry about Kashmir, which is undoubtedly huge in size and mighty in terms of quality.

Three years after sealing his conquest of Kashmir, emperor Akbar expressed his desire to visit Kashmir. Some of his advisors are reported to have discouraged him from undertaking such a journey. It is quite possible that they might have expected some reaction, or there might have been some other reasons; however, the emperor comes. His court chronicler, Abul Fazl, mentions the visit in his famous chronicle, *Akbarnama*:

"Since the wonder of destiny increases farsighted thoughts, he was constantly thinking of Kashmir and imagining its delightful climate. When the incomparable deity brought that beautiful region into the imperial realm, it increased the emperor's desire to tour that land of perpetual spring. As much as the chatterers at the court represented that it was not wise for a monarch to abandon such a vast expanse and go off to a corner without an important reason of state, the emperor refused to agree, saying, ' The divine Bestower gives me no choice in this desire, and furthermore Jannat Ashyani (Humayun) took this wish to the grave with him. Our expedition there will be the fulfilment of his desire." (Quoted in Anubhuti Maurya, 2017)

Needless to mention, before Akbar when Humayun was besieged by Sher Shah in 1539-40, one of his army commanders, Mirza Haider Dughlat, suggested him to invade Kashmir and establish a safe heaven there for himself; however, the proposal of Mirza Haider was turned down and Humayun did not attempt to invade Kashmir. May be this why Akbar is reported to have said that "*Jannat Ashyani* took this wish to the grave".

Akbar visited Kashmir three times: in 1589, 1593 and 1597. For Jahangir, Kashmir was his most favourite destination and he is said to have visited Kashmir more than any other Mughal ruler. He visited Kashmir in 1607, 1619-20, 1622, 1624, 1625, 1626 and in 1627. Jahangir is reported to have said this lyrical praise about Kashmir as Paradise:

"Kashmir is a perennial garden and an ironclad bastion. For monarchs, it is a garden that delights the eye, and for poor people it is an enjoyable place of retreat. Its lovely meadows and beautiful waterfalls are beyond description. Its flowing waters and springs are beyond number. As far as the eye can see, there is greenery and running water. Red roses, violets, and narcissi grow wild; there are fields after fields of all kinds of flowers; and the varieties of herbs are too many to count. During the enchanting spring, mountains and plain are filled with all sorts of blossoms; gateways, walls, courtyards, and roofs of houses come ablaze with tulips. What can be said of plateaus covered with refreshing clover…" (in Sunil Sharma, 2016)

Shahjahan is also reported to have visited Kashmir almost as many times as Jahangir. The emperors would come along with their coterie and visit places in Kashmir, explore the novelties of the region and undertake hunting expeditions. By Jahangir's and Shahjanhan's times, Kashmir was not only accessible as its mountains and routes had been tamed by the empire, it had also submitted to the Mughal empire; this was not so during Akbar's and Humayun's times. Kashmir was then considered strange, exotic, and inaccessible because of its mighty mountains and arduous routes, hence invasions were always avoided. The gardens and springs of Kashmir were a total delight for all the Mughal emperors and their court poets. It reminded them of the gardens of Eden and all the beautiful images in Persian poetry, hence *Jannat nazir*, *firdous barr ruy e zameen ast* and similar other descriptions and lyrical pastorals.

In this context, it won't be out of place to mention and cultural historians have documented it that a good number of Mughal court poets visited Kashmir, lived here and wrote a huge body of poetry in praise of the gardens, springs and seasons of Kashmir. Some of these poets include the following: Faizi, Talib Amuli, Kalim Kashani, Qudsi Mashhadi, Salim Tehrani, Zafar Khan Ahsan, Mulla Shah Badakshi, Munir Lahori, Salik Qazvini, Bihishti Haravi, Saidi Tihrani, Fani Kashmiri, Mulla Tughra, Inayat Khan Ashna, Juya Tabrizi, Binish Kashmiri and Nasir Ali Sirhindi.(Sunil Sharma, 2016)

What historians of Mughal culture and commentators of Mughal court Persian poetry about Kashmir note is that the huge body of Mughal pastoral poetry about Kashmir is an expression of the Persio-Arabic Mughal aesthetic that they had brought to Hindustan. Moreover, such pastorals reflect the Mughal desire for the virgin gardens of Kashmir that they had heard of as an exotic and landlocked territory in *ajaib* tales and travel writings in Arabic and Persian from 9th to 15th centuries. Apart from the element of desire for the conquest of the unknown topographies, it also reflects the relationship of a Mughal periphery with its center and imagined and idealized cultural boundaries. In his paper, "Of Tulips and Daffodils: Kashmir *Jannat Nazir* as a Political Landscape in the Mughal Empire", Anubhuti Maurya makes the following comment:

"For the Mughal empire, the landscape of Kashmir was central to the relationship between the empire and the region. A Valley in the Western Himalayas, Kashmir nestled behind a high wall of mountains. It formed the northern border of the empire, where issues of access, control and articulation of power were an important concern. Over the 16th and 17th centuries, a corpus of texts in the Mughal court-chronicles, travel accounts, epistles and administrative documents described and discussed the region. Through these writings, Kashmir moved from being an uncharted region on the borders of the empire to a province cognizable within the oecumene." (2017)

What this paper argues is that Mughal court poetic aesthetics is much more than an aesthetic outpouring. It is knowledge, power, desire of conquest and demand of total submission if read in the context of political and administrative control that Mughal Badshahs had. Not only that, the Mughal court poetry constructed and manufactured a godly image of their kings in their qasidas by showering an exaggerated praise of their power, thereby constructing false desires of more and more power and possessions in them. Court poetry, therefore, was propaganda as well as a fifth generation psychological warfare for the Mughal elite and royalty.

However, before I come to the reading of a select samples from the Mughal court poetry about Kashmir, it would be worth mentioning to place on record the genesis of exotic and unknown Kashmir and its evolution as a Political and ideological metaphor in Mughal Persian court poetry. It does not start all of a sudden in the 16th and the 17th centuries. The construction actually dates back to 9th century. Back then and thereafter Kashmir was being described and discussed in Arabic and Persian writings in exotic terms. The stories of land had travelled to the Arab world through travelers, men of business and trade, scholars and itinerant Sufis. Kashmir was in Arabic and Persian imagination a strange place as for example Buzurg ibn Shaharyar's accounts range from the conversion of the king to Islam (2000:2); he gives the description of a gorge between mountains which held a large cache of diamonds of unparalled beauty, protected by a ring of fire(103); there is, in fact, in one of his accounts, the mention of a marketplace which human beings could not see and jinns would shop, market and gossip there.(2-3)Such *ajaib* tales were being told about Kashmir in Central and Arab world long before the arrival of Mughals in Kashmir in the 16th century. What is, however, very interesting is that a kind of mapping and marking of Kashmir was being conducted by such *ajaib* tales and Orientalist poets of the Romantic and Victorian writers of English writers were doing about the East, sometimes as an act of fantasy and sometimes under the influence of the stories that they had heard or read from the people.

The unknown topographies and geographies actually always cultivate a desire and hunger to know and to explore, thereby resulting in knowledge production and subsequent authority and power over the subject. Al-Biruni is known for his famous chronicle titled *Kitab al Hind* which he wrote in the Gaznavid court in the 11th century. His *Kitab al Hind* and Yazid's *Zafarnama* are also said to have influenced the Mughal yearning and desire for Kashmir. Al Biruni's discussion on and descriptions of Kashmir are focused on two things: one, geography of the region, its routes and passes; chief modes of transportation; the origin and the course of Jhelim and Sindh rivers; Srinagar city and its surroundings; in these topographical descriptions, he stressed on the insularity of Kashmir; two, he discussed Kashmir as a significant center of Sanskritic learning with a strong indigenous and independent tradition.(Anubhuti Maurya, 2017)In fact, Al-Biruni linked the innovative character of Kashmir academia and scholarship with its geographic insularity.(ibid)He, after giving detailed

description of the climate of Kashmir, the villages of Kashmir and the rivers of Kashmir, " stressed on the difficulty of access to the region hidden behind high mountains".(ibid) Maurya notes that the Arab *ajaib* tales, geographies and Persian traditions of the Timurid court:

"Were informed by reports of itinerant travelers and trading caravans. Kashmir appeared in these different textual imaginations because of its presence in overlapping netwroks of commerce, piety and politics"(ibid); Sufi travellers' itinerary between Balkh, Badakhshan, Kashmir, Kishtwar, Ladakh, Yarkand and Tibet had deep links with the twin holy cities of Makka and Madina, hence travelled the information, topographical account and exotic image of Kashmir to far off places in Central Asia and the Arab world.

Again, it would be in place to mention that going by these 9th century to 15th century accounts Kashmir by and large was treated as an insular, landlocked and exotic place; in fact, this intransitivity and insular factor mentioned in *ajaib* tales and travel writings came into focus in 1539-40 when the besieged Humanyun was suggested to invade by Mirza Haider Dughlat and the suggestion was turned down on the grounds that Kashmir was isolated and difficult to access.(ibid) Mirza Haider, however, challenged the stereotype and invaded Kashmir, where due to fragmentation of the ruling elite and his military maneuvers he succeeded in establishing his proxy government for at least ten years; in the meanwhile, Humayun had taken refuge in the Safavid court. During his ten year rule on Kashmir, Mirza Haider wrote *Tarikh e Rashidi*, a book that changed the earlier Mughal perception about Kashmir as an isolated and insular place; in this way, when in the 16th century emperor Akbar invaded Kashmir Mirza Haider's ten year rule formed the base of his claim on Kashmir.(ibid)Akbar's successful expedition on Kashmir was heralded by his chroniclers as a moment of victory and conquest(ibid); it looks like as it is true about all the imperial forces that Akbar and his courtiers had a strong desire for Kashmir, particularly the challenge to break the status of insularity that Kashmir had in Mughal imagination so much so that his empire tame and conquer the topography of Kashmir and the people living inside. It was during Akbar's reign that Mulla Ahmad bin Nasrullah wrote *Tarikh e Alfi*, Abul Fazl wrote *Akbarnama* and *Aain e Akbari* and Nizam ud Din Ahmad compiled *Tabqat e Akbari*. One finds highly informative, descriptive and statistical accounts and discussions on Kashmir in these works (ibid); therefore, such works again chart, mark and map Kashmir by producing knowledge about it, thereby bringing Kashmir under the authority of Mughal political imagination and control through knowledge as well as its political will. Comparing the earlier *ajaib* tales with the chronicles of Akbar's times, one may notice that the knowledge is now systematic based on observation, organization and analysis; in fact, Abul Fazl engaged with the native Kashmiri knowledge system for having a proper understanding of Kashmir and its history. He mentioned the *Rajtarangni* time and again. In this way, one may assume that Kashmir as an exotic place full of *ajaib* ceased to be a fact after Akbar's conquest of Kashmir; however, the stock memory of Persian images and metaphors continued to be a fact in the court poetry of Mughals and was, therefore, a fact in the times to come as well.

As argued earlier, Kashmir *Jannat Nazir*, *Firdous Barr Ruy e Zameen ast* and other such highly aesthetic expressions found in Mughal court poetry are reflections of the aesthetic culture that the Mughal court had inherited from more than a thousand year old cultural flowering in the form of Persio-Arabic cultural repository; however, in our particular context, it won't be an understatement if the same highly valued cultural expressions are read in terms of Kashmir becoming as aesthetic object of desire and control. Faizi would call Kashmir an "*ajab karnamah e taqdir*", thus praising and glorifying the topography and mesmerizing landscape of Kashmir but simultaneously rendering the native inhabitant invisible and silent and cultivating a strong craving and desire in the mind of powerful *shahanshah* to have it as a gift of the Lord. Urfi Shirazi's qasida " *Darr Wasf e Kashmir*" begins with these soulful lines: " *harr sokhteh jani ki ba Kashmirdarr ayad// gar murgh kabab ast ke ba bal wa par ayad*"; Kashmir has according to Urfi miraculous ability to rejuvenate but being a court poet who had commercial reasons associated with his poetry and was associated with the corridors of power such a couplet belies the facts given the invisibility of the natives in most of court poetry on Kashmir. In this context, Anubhuti Maurya makes the following comment:

"In the first half of the 17th century, Kashmir remained a distinct topic of literary compositions of the court. Most major poets of the court like Salim Tehrani, Mohammad Jan Qudsi (d 1646), Talib Amuli (d 1652), Zafar Khan Ahsan (d 1670), Mir Ilahi (d 1653), Tughra Mashhadi (d 1667-68) and others had distinctive poems in their oeuvre. These poems still spoke of the region in terms of wonder. But now they expressed wonder at the gardens and buildings constructed by the Mughal elite. The gardens were described as paradisical and the landscape of the valley appeared as a worthy background to these imperial creations" (Maurya)

The Mughal gardens of Kashmir would be called Bagh e Faiz Bakhsh and Farah Bakhash which undoubtedly they are given the topography and landscape; however, as Maurya argues, " The names given to places in Kashmir referred to events and people linked to Mughal presence in the region. The changed appellations inserted the Mughal presence into the everyday imagination of these places as well as infused them with the histories of localities. When names like Shalimar and Sahibabad travelled to other parts of the empire, they specifically invoked the Jannat naziri of Kashmir.This imaginary, by the mid-17th century, had become part of the imperial vocabulary of self-representation".(ibid)

Again, the court imagination of the time seems to be obsessed with the self of the ruling elite even while showering the praise on the topography and landscape of the subject land. Kalim Kashani would write " *ghalat guftam-chi bustan u chi*

gulzar// baharistan, nigaristan, iram-zar" while declaring Kashmir more than a garden, the question, however, is what is the objective of this praise? He urges the addressees of his poem to" Come for a trip on the Dal, what is a rose garden?// Collect flowers on a boat, what is a skirt?, but ends the poem with a benediction like " As long as Kashmir is mentioned with good words, may it be renowned in the world// The Pir Panjal mountain seeks elevation from the parasol of his fortune, all year". Sunil Sharma, a noted historian on the subject, would have it that " Nature in an idealized form had always been paramount in Persian literature, and in Mughal Persian poetry it was particularly idealized by a group of innovative poets as the 'true' paradise of which the urban world was a pale reflection" (Sharma 2016); however, the pretext of court, power of *shahnshas* and the associated imagery with reference to the growing invisibility of the people demands for a deconstructive approach for reading the court poetry of all the times, including the Mughal empire.

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